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Towards a Radically Social Constructivism

Abstract

This brief paper responds to a featured article By Ernst von Glasersfeld, titled “Who conceives of society,” Constructivist Foundations 3,2: 59-64, 2008, in which he elaborates his radical constructivist conception of human cognition about social phenomena. The response agrees that individuals construct their own meanings but questions whether discrepancies in understanding are recognizable and resolvable in conversation. Understanding, it suggests, does not refer to similarities of meanings, but is asserted to move a conversation on, including to other topics. Regarding social phenomena, the response suggests that social organizations, for example, consist of networks of conversations of which its participants can know or conceptualize only their parts and must trust the other participants to coordinate their contributions within what constitutes a social organization. It seeks to put language use in place of cognition and gives preference to social/conversational over individual/cognitive conceptions of being human.

Keywords

Cognition, Society, Constructivism, Language, Social interaction

Disciplines

Communication | Epistemology | Organizational Communication | Other Social and Behavioral Sciences | Philosophy of Language

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This paper comments on a target article:

Ernst von Glasersfeld, "Who Conceives Society?" *Constructivist Foundations* 3.2: 59-64;
followed by Ernst's comments on my comments, *Constructivist Foundations* 3.2: 102
and an unpublished clarification by me.

Towards a Radically Social Constructivism

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[1] The first 22 paragraphs of Ernst von Glasersfeld's paper constitute the clearest introduction to *radical constructivism* I have read. It is eminently readable and I would recommend it to anyone who has the slightest uncertainty about this version of constructivism. It does not cover new ground, but being clearly written is a virtue and Ernst is its unquestioned authority.

[2] I have some minor comments on his section 4, on communication. Here, Ernst draws a valuable distinction between *training* and *teaching*. Educators have the choice between training someone to perform - whether to excel in a sport, perform a calculation, or become literate - and what Ernst calls "engendering understanding," facilitating the creation of meaning for what is said. Criteria for achieving the former are set by the educator. Criteria for achieving the latter come from the learner's experiences and interests, considered subjective by some. Both processes being instrumental, their conceptions are embedded in an asymmetrical teacher-student relationship. Both also coincide with the communication-theoretical distinction between senders and receivers, for which Ernst cites Shannon as an example. There are other notions of communication. But before I introduce one of them in my §13, let me take a look at his §25.

[3] In §25, Ernst describes Shannon's technical model of communication. It involves physical signals – sounds, images, and electronic impulses – traveling from one communicator to another. The physical signals chosen by the sender, he suggests, "should be considered as instructions to select particular meanings from a list that, together with the list of agreed signals, constitute the 'code'." The communication theorist's presumption is that communication requires both to use a common code. When tying the same physical signals to the same experiences, communicators will be able to understand each other.

[4] I fully accept the radical constructivist premise of *cognitive autonomy*, asserting that our nervous system does not have direct access to what exists outside of it and can only construct the world one comes to know in terms of its own processes. For humans to practice their living, their constructed world must persist in the presence of perturbations from an environment, or in Ernst's terms, it must "fit" that environment. Thus, conceptual structures cannot be regarded as representing something principally inaccessible. Accepting this premise entails that we have no direct access to the cognition of others either. What is meaningful to me may mean something quite different to someone else and that difference does not matter unless it interferes with my own world.

[5] What then are the physical signals of Shannon-like communication theorists? Are they not the meanings that physicists (as detached observers) attribute to what they are trained to perceive and measure? If one takes physical signals not as external events but as having the

meanings that observing physicists ascribe to them, then the code that the communication theorist seeks to discover cannot relate meanings to signals and back to meanings, as the theory demands, but must relate accounts of a sender's experience to accounts of the communication theorist's experiences and to accounts of the receiver's experiences. But how can an observer do that?

[6] I concur with Ernst's answer that it can't be done. Each receiver of communications selects meanings of what was said in relation to his or her past experiences. Ernst explains that "to understand what someone has said or written means no less but also no more than to have built up a conceptual structure that, in the given context, appears to be compatible with the structure the speaker has in mind. And this compatibility, as a rule, manifests itself in no other way than that the receiver says and does nothing that contravenes the speaker's expectations" (§28). Unable to know when one's conceptual structure is compatible with another, Ernst settles on the implication of presuming this inability: no evidence to the contrary.

[7] A communication theorist of the Shannon variety who accepts my qualifications in [4], [5], and [6] may well assume experiences and meanings to be involved on both sides of a communication channel, but without direct access to them, that theorist cannot possibly construct a code – except by projecting his or her own experiences on senders and receivers. This cognitive ability is what Ernst characterizes with Kant as "imput(ing) to our conspecifics the cognitive abilities that we become aware of in ourselves" (§22). Since this confines us to our own cognition, how would someone else's understanding be manifest? Here my answer deviates from Ernst's conception of meaning as that which speakers construct and associate with words, phrases, and larger units of speech or writing before generating "an approximate understanding of what it (they) mean(s) to other speakers" (§ 27). Short of the absence of "occasions when we realize that, up to that point in time, we have been using a word in a way that now turns out to be idiosyncratic in some particular respect" (§ 27), when do we know understanding has been accomplished? What is the meaning of 'understanding'?

[8] First of all, '*understanding*' is a word used widely, not just by communication theorists. It is uttered by someone in the presence of others, whether in response to something said or written (actually, also concerning a practice). It does not occur in anyone's mind. Asserting '*I understand*' implies little, if anything, about whether two conceptual structures match (as in the idea of understanding as cognitive sharing), are compatible (as in the idea of understanding as two conceptual structures fitting like a hand in a glove), or I have generated "an approximate understanding of what (a word) means to other speakers" (§ 27). To state a relationship between two conceptual structures one must know both, even if we made them up. But we operate only our own. To me, '*I understand*' signals nothing other than my sense of closure and my willingness to go on talking about something else. Saying '*I understand*' amounts to a conversational move. It suggests a particular turn. It is an act that I perform in language, expecting a response.

[9] Acts do something, whether performed in or without speech. Words or linguistic utterances do not merely invoke experiences, as Ernst suggests, they can change the course of one's actions, permit one to go on. Any speech act, performed by a speaker, may be accepted by its addressee or interrogated. Saying '*I understand*' is (implicitly) accepted when the conversation continues to another issue. It is interrogated when I am requested to give reasons for saying so, which in turn may be accepted or may result in further interrogations.

[10] Likewise, its negation, '*I don't understand*,' serves as my request for elaborations on what was said, and it may be repeated until understanding is confirmed. Between asserting a lack of understanding and claiming its restoration, speakers juggle to coordinate their understanding to what they see or hear, knowing only whether they feel justified in saying 'I understand,' and at best hypothesizing whether others would say this as well. 'I (don't) understand' has dialogical meaning.

[11] In these terms, educators may talk, trusting their intuition of being understood, until someone interrupts the flow. For those whom Ernst calls *teachers* – aiming at understanding – an interruption consists of hearing an utterance like '*I don't understand*.' Devoted teachers take their time to repair the interruption, until they hear their students saying something to the effect of '*now I understand*.' By contrast, and I am not sure if Ernst would go so far, when educators watch for something that disconfirms or contravenes their own expectations, then they become *trainers*. Trainers apply their own criteria to what they observe to determine whether the students' performance is acceptable: giving the correct or a reasonable answer to a test question, adequately building on what was said, or writing without violating grammatical rules. As Ernst stated in other publications, none of this says anything about how the student actually conceptualizes a task and I therefore wonder why we are so concerned about conceptions, fitting or not.

[12] Note that in Ernst's examples, communication between educators and students is asymmetrical. Influence and information is assumed to flow one-way, and both parties must accept their inequality for teaching or training to succeed. As Gregory Bateson taught us, human communication can be symmetrical or asymmetrical. I do not think Ernst would disagree. However, to come to grips with social phenomena—as in Ernst's question "Who conceives society" in section 5 of his paper—one needs to explore a more general paradigm of communication in order to discuss social constructions that are more specific than 'society.' Otherwise, one may get lost in abstractions.

[13] To me, the most basic and far-reaching experience-based paradigm of communication takes off from the concept of *con-sensual co-ordination*. Maturana and Varela coined this phrase without developing it fully. In the organization theory literature it is called "co-orientation." Inserting a dash into 'co-ordination' suggests cooperation rather than what managers do for their subordinates and inserting a dash into 'con-sensual' suggests something like 'jointly sensed or perceived' as opposed to 'reaching consensus,' such as during a meeting. Accordingly, I take consensual coordination to be (1) the experience of *participating* in a situation in which (2) participants observe *each other*, i.e., perceive others and presume to be perceived by them as well, and (3) coordinate their actions in the presence of something *seen as jointly attended to*. The latter may be the context of that coordination, goods exchanged for services, a topic under discussion, or a technology used jointly. Examples of consensual coordination include birds flying in formation, the accident-free flow of dense traffic on a highway, people talking about the same TV show, and a family conversing at a dinner table. In case of the latter, each family member has a concept of belonging to the family, not necessarily shared. They see each other sitting at the table, observe what everyone is eating, hear what everyone is saying, and can conceptualize how the dinner conversation unfolds. Note that the definition of consensual coordination does not rely on whether it is symmetrical or asymmetrical.

[14] I am suggesting that conversation, such as at a dinner table, is paradigmatic of all social formations. It is jointly managed by its participants and entirely self-organizing. It proceeds

consensually from topic to topic, punctuated by speech acts and conversational turns without repeating itself, and it evolves in front of everyone's eyes and ears. Participants feel free to articulate their experiences as long as they believe that they are of interest to other participants. Their cognitive autonomy (including their bodily integrity) is respected by acknowledging and braiding their individual contributions into a consensually available thread. Understanding becomes coordinated around this thread. It is no longer an individual's conception, but the consensual part of the conversational coordination. While a conversation may accomplish something in passing, e.g., eating dinner or learning something that brings about other kinds of coordinations elsewhere, convergence is not a requirement. By (my) definition, all conversations preserve the possibility of their continuation at another time or place and with the same or different participants. In other words, when people with the right kind of conversational experiences meet in the right kind of contexts, conversation may be reconstituted and continue.

[15] In claiming that conversation is paradigmatic of all social formations, I am suggesting that other forms can be explained by recognizing constraints on the ideal conversation. For example, in interview situations, dialogical equality is suspended, one asks questions and the other agrees to answer them. In negotiations of a business deal or labor dispute, there is the desire to converge to a resolution and no desire to continue indefinitely. In the exertion of power over subordinates, accountability is unevenly distributed, communicators are not dialogically equal. In the conduct of science, scientists agree to speak and write in terms of a discipline-specific vocabulary, a formal discourse.

[16] I agree with Ernst's criticism of social constructionists' (written with 'on') taking interpersonal relations as ontological givens and developing concepts of cognition as derived from them (§31). But I would not want constructivism (written with a 'v') to be limited to the study of individual cognition. Unlike Ernst, to me, "society," besides being too abstract to experience as such, is *not* merely "a collective term for the handful of people we have learned to recognize ... and to whom we may describe a number of common characteristics as well as individual differences (plus) people whom we consider part of the community even though we have only seen them casually or heard or read of them" (§39). Social formations cannot be reduced to collective terms as for 'furniture,' 'water,' or 'group,' here of a group of people with mutually fitting individual cognitions. From the perspective of a detached observer, a society may well be conceived as a collectivity, but it can be experienced only by *active participation*. And because participation in society entails taking part in shaping it, the social forms within which society manifests itself should be conceived of as *social constructions in progress*.

[17] For example, while it is likely that migratory birds tacitly know their annual route, it is unlikely that geese, for example, have a fixed idea of the formation in which they are flying. Their formation is the result of consensual coordination among a few immediate neighbors. We may observe one goose in front of a formation but this does not mean it is the designated leader of the flock. Geese take turns in that position much like we take turns in conversations. Studies suggest that the formations that emerge during the flight of geese reflect the makeup of their visual apparatus, sensorily invoked during flight – much as we take turns in conversations because it is physiologically difficult for us to speak to others and listen to them at the same time.

[18] On the other hand, consider the other extreme, well short of society: working for a large social organization. Being on the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania, I have learned

what to say and how to respond to colleagues, students and administrators in my physical, academic, and functional proximity. I have an abstract idea of the university's organizational hierarchy and a concept of its mission. I can read applicable rules of conduct representing the history of how the university resolved past problems. I continuously renegotiate my identity within limits acceptable to others. I make commitments and keep them, and I employ speech acts to rearrange my environment in order to succeed in what I want to do. Should I violate written rules, I am sure to get a response from pertinent office holders, without knowing who that will be since individuals change their roles more often than the definition of their offices. I am reading their response in terms of the rules that make it possible for me to be faculty member, which tend to exceed the lifespan of most university employees. True, a social organization can work only when sufficient numbers and kinds of qualified individuals are willing to work under the umbrella of a conceptual whole; it is the network of communication, written or spoken, that links my participation to what the other participants enable me to do.

[19] I am suggesting that all social organizations are realized (made real) in networks of conversations, develop their own histories, and are facilitated and constrained by infrastructure – ranging from buildings to house these conversations to technologies adopted to coordinate various organizational efforts – that distributes resources obtained from their environment among members. All social organizations also develop a culture, institutionalize their rules and practices, and keep records that enable its current members to read the organization's past and consensually coordinate their future conduct.

[20] Individual members of a social organization may shift participation from one conversation to another but become privy to only a few. Individual experiences of the whole are limited to particular vocabularies, utterances, and narratives that enter and become part of the conversations in which they participate. It is in the use of such language that the institutionalized rules and practices of their organization are invoked, shaped, and reinterpreted. Participants in conversations employ speech acts to create joint accomplishments (consensual coordinations) and hold each other accountable for their respective contributions. What happens outside of conversations reveals itself either by drawing outsiders' voices, vocabularies, narratives, and writing into one's conversation or by making parts of one conversation available to other conversations.

[21] Clearly, cognition cannot be observed. It needs to be inferred. Conceptual structures are abstracted from behaviors, especially from linguistic accounts generated when languaging with others. Such abstractions may be obtained from interviewing subjects, observing behaviors assumed to involve thought processes, or content-analyzing texts found circulating within a social formation. Even non-verbal experiments, often conducted by radical constructivists, are wrapped in language: subjects are instructed what to do; observations are recorded, described and analyzed in categories derived from literature; and findings are discussed among colleagues and published. Assertions about conceptual structures not only rely on language, they also concern the use of language by others. Languaging, spoken and listened to, written and read, is individually experienced but consensually created, inherently interpersonal, essentially social, and participatory in the sense that listeners and readers codetermine what makes sense for speakers to say or writers to write, even dancers to express. If this is so, I question the benefits of ignoring the social nature of the linguistic data by isolating what could be explained psychologically and by abstracting conceptual structures from such data. Cognitive explanations of social realities limit our ability to cope with that world to descriptions of its parts at the expense of the larger picture that we construct and

consult in everyday life. Shouldn't we abandon the individualism inherited from psychology and instead study how we communicate with each other, actively participate in phenomena of joint interest, and experience the social realities that we are always in the process of co-constructing—consensually?

[22] To learn how we socially construct our realities, I suggest we start by exploring: (1) the constitutive role of *individual participation* in conversations; (2) the *interactive (dialogical) use of language* - speech acts, language games, and conversations that are born in and alter their users' consensual coordination and perception; (3) the role of *vocabularies and narratives* that constrain these conversations in the name of the social formations of which these conversations are a part; (4) the *texts* that (social organizations or networks of) conversations consensually generate, record or pass on to other conversations from which they *come back to their source, rearticulated or responded to*, affecting the generation of future texts; (4) exploring ways to *weave the conversations in which we participate into networks of conversations*, into social systems that appear entirely virtual, but manifest themselves in the constraints adopted in and/or imposed on our conversations; and finally (5) developing *methods for analyzing consensually available linguistic data*, narratives, and speech acts, such that their results can affect ongoing conversations, improving them or challenging unbearable constraints that make participation unproductive and joyless. Succeeding in the latter would demonstrate one's competence as a participant in a social formation (viability), which is a criterion stronger than passive conceptualization.

[23] The foregoing is intended to claim a place for a *radically social constructivism* that does not rely on the metaphysical assumption of ontological givens, avoids cognitivist abstractions (or reductions) from the communication processes in which we realize ourselves as human beings, and refuses to adopt the objectifications of sociological discourses. Instead, it builds on the embodied, largely linguistic, and hence consensually experienced practices of conversing with one another. Languageing is an intrinsically social phenomenon and so are all explanations that are grounded in language. As Ludwig Wittgenstein said about language, everything worth talking about is there, nothing is hidden; there is no private language; to which I would add that the cognition we talk of is not private either.

Ernst von Glasersfeld's Comments, *Constructivist Foundations* 3.2:102, 2008

[28] I want to thank Krippendorff for his precise and enriching elaboration of my views on communication. As we are concerned with a very detailed analysis, let me add my bit to "I understand" (Krippendorff's §8). I, too, see it as a form of closure, indicating that one has succeeded in fitting one's interpretation of what the other said into a coherent network of ideas which *may* also fit what the other had in mind. It does not, however guarantee that one has captured what the other intended to say.

[29] Krippendorff's scenario of the family at dinner (§14) is a charming idealization. I quite agree with the description – except for the fact that there may also be participants who "feel free to articulate their experiences" even if they are not of interest whatsoever to others.

[29] I like what Krippendorff says about organizations being realized in "networks of conversations" (§19). This seems to me somewhat similar to the way the concept of "space" can be constituted by a network of physical movements. But, again, in my view this does not eliminate a fundamental subjective relativity. I see conversation as Gordon Pask used to describe it, as an activity involving at least four: myself and the person my partner thinks I am, and my partner and the person I think he or she is. I have never denied that there may be a world beyond the domain of cognition, but I have focused on "cognitive explanations" (Krippendorff's §21) because I was working on a rational theory of knowing. My conclusion, unlike Krippendorff's final remark (§23) is that cognition, in spite of adaptation to perturbations created by others, is a private affair.

Klaus Krippendorff's Comments on Ernst von Glasersfeld's Comments

Kind as Ernst's comments are, I do not think he appreciates the interactive and essentially social notion of language I am embracing. Saying "I understand" can cause a conversation to terminate, go on to something else or be challenged by a listener for all kinds of reasons. All speech acts can be rejected or accepted in many ways. The reasons for saying "I understand" could be many as well – impatience, disinterest, agreement or acquiescence. Not only are these reasons irrelevant to what the utterance does, we will not know them unless we can ask and receive the speaker's answer, which is another example of using language interactively. Ernst's interpretation of "I understand" as "indicating that one has succeeded in fitting one's interpretation of what the other said into a coherent network of ideas which *may* also fit what the other had in mind" derives from his psychological theory of cognition, not from what a speaker may have had in mind.

True, in conversations people may also contribute what may not be of interest to others. I should have said that participants contribute what they assume is *understandable* to others (See Grice's cooperative principles), i.e., avoids causing utterances like "I don't understand."

Of course, I expected Ernst to disagree with my provocative conclusion that "the cognition *we talk of* is not private." However, I continue to maintain that all talk, all explanations, including psychological ones, occur in language and rely on a vocabulary whose use is common within one's speech community. Common use does not imply cognitive sharing or agreements on its meanings. It merely suggests consensual coordination of its use. Ernst's vocabulary – experiences, subjective, concepts, networks of ideas, coherency, fit, and viability carries its social history, its etymology of use, into the present. Ernst's talk of cognition, therefore, can hardly be considered "a private affair."